

## 2007 Restaurants of the year: A brave new world



Steve Rice, Star Tribune

Brothers Sameh Wadi, chef, and Saed Wadi, managing partner, in the dining room at Saffron Restaurant & Lounge.

A lot can happen in 12 months. January heralded a seismic shift, with Auriga, Levain and Five Restaurant & Street Lounge calling it quits. But wouldn't you know it? By December, a pack of newcomers had re-energized the scene.

By [Rick Nelson](#), Star Tribune

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Brasa staff: Left to right, Hannah Drehmann, server; Juan Sosa, manager; Julia Once, prep cook; Ricardo Saltos, chef; Alex Roberts, owner and Scott Flewelling, manager.

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Co-owners Heidi Woodman, Frank Thorpe and Stewart Woodman pose in their Minneapolis restaurant.

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[Photo gallery: 2007 Restaurants of the year](#)

### **Brasa Rotisserie**

Alex Roberts sure read the market right. For his second Minneapolis marquee, the chef and co-owner of Restaurant Alma turned his attention toward the simple pleasures of home cooking. Leaving the land of hot dish, Roberts headed south for inspiration, gleaning from West African, Caribbean and South American cooking traditions to forge an affordable and original dining experience, one based on a pair of singularly delicious proteins (slow-cooked pork, crispy roast chicken), a mouth-watering list of simple side dishes (oven-glazed garnet yams, Cheddar-enriched grits, jalapeño-laced creamed spinach, a superlative corn bread) and a short list of inexpensive beers and wines. Brasa, which is Spanish for "red-hot coals," has quickly evolved into a top takeout address. Hanging out in the cleverly repackaged former service station is a treat, too. Put in Hollywood terms, Brasa is the feel-good restaurant of the year. For Rick Nelson's full review of Nick and Eddie, go [here](#).

### **Heidi's Minneapolis**

For chef Stewart Woodman, the third time feels like the charm. First came the auspicious local cooking debut (Levain), followed by the big-stakes failure (Five Restaurant & Street Lounge). Now he and spouse Heidi Woodman have embraced more modest ambitions. They're stamping their distinctive imprint on the neighborhood restaurant template, taking over the intimate Pane Vino Dolce digs, hooking up with a new partner (Frank Thorpe, who doubles as a charming maitre' d) and putting every square inch of their elfin kitchen to use. The ingredients may be more proletariat than in past gigs, but each plate sings with Woodman's singular cooking style (see our review in next week's Taste). In a year peppered with affordable, well-executed neighborhood

restaurants -- Cafe Maude, Cafe Levain, Wayzata Eatery and Wine Bar and Blackbird -- Heidi's definitely rises to the top.

### **Saffron**

While every dining entrepreneur around him was going casual, Sameh Wadi took off in the other direction: white tablecloths, attentive service, expense-account prices. And thoroughly exciting, exacting and elegant cooking. The 24-year-old chef knows how to finesse North African and Middle Eastern flavors for Midwestern audiences, converting the unfamiliar into must-haves: harissa-laced lamb sausages, gorgeous pickled vegetables, fig-kissed quail; even exotics such as tender, gently fried lamb brains are handled with aplomb. Go for a snack -- the fiery lamb meatballs, eggplant-cauliflower fritters and citrus-curry blue crab salad constitute some of the city's most memorable starters -- and then stay for the whole shebang, starting with a shallow, fragrant bowl of salmon and clams in a saffron-fennel-olives broth. No doubt about it; for diners, Wadi's gamble is certainly paying off. For Rick Nelson's full review of Saffron, go [here](#).